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ABSTRACT

There are three arguments against the usefulness of present basic course textbooks in speech communication. First, there are certain inherent forces that will always drive textbook publishers toward the production of textbooks unsuitable for the basic course: "mentioning" (mentioning every principle ever heard of by potential users of the text), "dumbing down" (keeping content simple), "homogenizing" (eliminating any material which might offend), and "shilling" (the planned obsolescence of textbooks built into the present system). Second, basic texts are not reflective of the new audiences to be taught: minorities and the poor. Some of the communication channels left out of basic texts but used by minorities and the poor include: the extended family, minimum-wage workplaces, the ethnic or pentecostal church, labor unions, self-help associations, neighborhood taverns and dance halls, and amateur sporting teams. If students find racial or class barriers confronting them at every turn, or are having difficulty confronting their sexuality, or cannot see the relevance of so much college teaching because they are the first generation of their family to seek a higher education, then the content of current basic texts is a mockery of their deepest needs. Third, two sources of information provide appropriate materials: students themselves, and expert practitioners in the field. Putting students and practitioners together might result in appropriate texts, different for every student, prepared with word processor and xerox machine--self-made texts, undergoing constant revision, with no connection to the commercial publishing business. (SR)

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Rethinking the Formula: Suggestions for Improving Basic Course Texts

A presentation at the annual SCA Convention, Atlanta, GA
November 2, 1991

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Terry called me up last spring and asked me to present the arguments against the usefulness of present basic course texts. The arguments against our present textbooks, I think, are three in number. Here they are.

First, there are certain inherent forces which will always drive textbook publishers toward the production of textbooks unsuitable for the basic course. I shall call these forces "mentioning," "dumbing down," "homogenizing," and "shilling."

Subpoint a, "mentioning." By this I mean the necessity to cover bases, to mention every principle ever heard of by potential users of the text. It works this way. I am a member of an adoption committee. I think Maslow's hierarchy is terribly important and ought to be at least "mentioned" in the introductory course. I will naturally feel more favorable toward a text which contains Maslow's comforting pyramid than toward one which does not. But there are other ideas which are also felt to be important, either by me or by other instructors, and so savvy publishers will try to include all of these ideas in the text as well. By doing this, however, they will have little opportunity to do much more than "mention" these ideas, since there is not enough space to develop them thoroughly. Thus the desire to please all the instructors who serve as the potential market for the book leads to saying a little about a lot, rather than a lot about a little. Superficiality is therefore built into the system.

This tendency is of course by no means restricted to speech communication textbooks. It seems in fact an inherent problem in all introductory and survey texts, whether we are speaking of literature or American history or art education. Harriet Tyson and Arthur Woodward write of textbooks in general that they "have become compendiums of topics, none of which are treated in much depth." Linus Pauling in 1983 noted of introductory chemistry books this same tendency to say very little about a great deal. "There is far more information," he wrote, "than any student could be expected to learn in one year. Moreover, much of it is presented at so advanced a level -- yet at the same time so superficially -- that I think it could hardly be understood by a beginning student." What Pauling is saying here is that too much material, much of it advanced, is shoved into the introductory text, but there is no space to expand upon and explain these advanced concepts. Does all of this sound familiar when we look at textbooks in our own field? I believe it does. And a current trend in basic course design tends to make this situation even worse. Many of us now teach a "blended" course; that is, we teach interpersonal and even small group communication along with the basic principles of public speaking. When the basic text is expected to support all of this, the tendency to manufacture academic fast food is exacerbated. But publishers feel required to cover all this because otherwise they will lose customers.

Subpoint b, and another inherent force, is "dumbing down." Essentially, dumbing down is a natural consequence of having to be superficial. When you have a great deal of information to cover, and you don't have an opportunity to cover it very well, you have to keep things simple. But also, I've noticed that the people who end up teaching the basic course are the new people, the untenured people, or the part-timers and the graduate assistants in the cases when regular faculty cannot be released for such duties, or don't want to be. So when you don't know who might be teaching the basic course, or you think anyone can teach it, you don't want material too difficult. You want a common denominator that will hold constant over all sections, and when publishers are sensitive to all of this, this is another factor leading to dumbing down.

Another aspect of dumbing down is the packaging of content. MF Rogers writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that "most textbooks assume that students are weak readers. Boldface type for key terms, subheads every

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few paragraphs, pictures every other page or so, and omnipresent summaries all imply that students cannot understand without continuous coaching." Well, I will admit that the diverse student bodies we are attracting these days almost guarantee that we will have classes with diverse reading levels, particularly in the introductory course when the collegiate weeding process has not yet taken hold. But our texts are not helping students become better readers. "The constant cues," Rogers goes on, "suggest that students are incapable of sorting out the more important from the less important ideas, of drawing sound inferences, or recognizing irony. Typically, textbooks do most of the work students should be doing for themselves, while withholding the challenges that make students independent, self-confident learners." The result, Rogers concludes, is that "the typical textbook impedes the development of student's skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking." So we end up with "mentioning," staffing uncertainties, and what I think is an unwarranted sensitivity to student reading levels all contributing to a dumbing down of the basic text.

Subpoint c, the publishers also don't want anything disturbing or controversial, and the reason, again, is they don't want to lose their customers, so they homogenize. Now it turns out that much of communicative behavior is controversial: people engage in nonverbal behavior considered inappropriate to their gender, bosses pull powerplays on subordinates, parents verbally abuse children, sexual content and violence are pervasive in advertising. But you never see this in the textbooks. What you get instead is homogenization, the elimination of any material which might offend. I went to the basic texts I have on my own shelves the other day and looked just at the pictures. The first picture I saw had ten students holding books and smiling at each other, with just the politically correct number of women (5) and minorities (2) to be a suitable illustration for a text of the 90's. And as I went through this text, and the six books on the shelf next to it, I continued to find the students smiling, the Afro-Americans all wearing ties, the women in positions of authority, and no one, absolutely no one, incredibly angry and out of control. Was this the real world, or what?

So I asked my student aide, Tracy Kilgore Bledsoe, to check me out on this. I gave her five popular basic texts, chosen at random, and told her to ask the following questions of the illustrations in each. Did the books contain any rural, blue collar, or identifiably lower class settings? Did they show any ethnic tension or abrasive and abusive relationships? Did they show any religious communication? Did they show politically incorrect proportions of females and minorities, or show these groups in traditional roles like housekeeping or blue collar occupations? Here, from all the pictures in the five books, is what Tracy found. No rural settings. One possibly lower class setting in just one of the texts, but the setting is described as a "subculture." Only two pictures of characters in conflict, an unidentified street rally and (cute role reversal here) a female coach yelling at a male umpire. No instances of ethnic tension. No abusive relationships. No blue collar labor settings. Three books with no pictures of religious communication, one book with an illustration of a mainstream service, and one book which bit the bullet and showed all of two pictures, one of worship at Glide United Methodist Church in San Francisco, described as "exuberant and often controversial," and one of Billy Graham, described as "an effective communicator whose presence contributes to the power of the message." Finally, only one of the five books showing a politically incorrect proportion of minorities and women in positions of power. That book is coming out in a new edition this fall, and of course this oversight has been corrected.

So now to subpoint d, the shilling of textbooks. The mere fact that the book I just mentioned is going through another edition is because of the planned obsolescence built in to the present system. Textbooks don't really change very much from edition to edition, only enough so that old and new editions can't be used very easily in the same classroom. Here's why. College publishers want to sell books, and they don't sell books with a ten-year life span the way they sell books with a five-year life span, especially with the used textbook dealers around. And they don't sell books on the college level the way they do on the elementary and secondary level, where one decision in an adoption state like Texas can make the difference between profit and financial ruin. Instead, their market is a rather small one. But they still have to do the marketing, and this increases the price of the final product, especially when the total number of copies they sell is small and they have to spread the marketing cost over fewer copies. So how much is spent on marketing? Well, the freebies offered by the textbook publishers are according to some estimates at least 20 percent of the cost of their product. But the expenses are considered necessary because, as Connie Muther, a regular contributor to *Educational Leadership* magazine, points out, "publishers who provide the best wine and cheese presentations, free consumable materials, or free 'pilots'and accompanying giveaways win many investment

decisions." Is there a brand-new member of the SCA here today who doesn't think this takes place on the college level? Take me for an example. The books on my shelves are examination copies, my coffee cup was provided by one publisher, my paper clips by another. I've had breakfast in a penthouse restaurant overlooking New Orleans courtesy of the publishers seeking my business. They flood my mailbox the way drug companies flood the medical profession. And the publishers naturally want to pass this business expense along, not, certainly, to the instructors whom they've courted and who may not even know the cost of the text they're assigning, but to the students. Our students, of course, can't shop around for the best price or even the best product. They're a captive market and wholly at the mercy of the people who publish the texts we assign.

I have to say something here about that captive market. The only good analogy I can think of is medical care, the cost of which probably disturbs all of us in this room. Here is another case where we're prescribed something for our own good, often by people who don't know the cost of what they're prescribing. Then we discover we're unable to shop around, and end up paying a bill for something that is rising much faster than inflation. Is this comparable to textbooks? Sure. Estabrook and Sommer write in the *Chronicle* that professors are usually unaware of the price of the texts they're requiring, prices which by the way have quadrupled in the past decade. My student assistant tells me her books cost her $150 this semester but that she knows others who paid over $200. Top expenditure this semesters among the students in my basic communication sections was $225, but one of my students tells me that last semester he spent over $300. Publishers, like drug companies, will tell us their prices are justified because of all the research and development involved. To what end though this research and development, we might well ask. Do we find radically redesigned texts with revolutionary insights and cutting edge research, or has the R and D gone into finding more pictures and providing wider margins? I do know that Estabrook and Sommer reported in 1988 that the pre-tax profit in the textbook industry was 25 per cent.

But let me interject something more about price. Textbook prices inexorably rise each year whether or not costs of production and distribution rise, and like new cars it's very hard to pin down the exact retail price. Have you noticed that textbooks, unlike general trade books, don't have a retail price printed on the jacket? That's because publishers will raise prices for all copies in stock, even if some were printed in a previous year, and retailers are allowed to pick whatever markup they think their market will bear. The text I'm using this year costs my college store $20.30, net. The store sells it for $24.95,which by the way constitutes a very low markup in this business. But if you call the publisher's 800 number and ask the price, you'll be told the retail price is between $30 and $31. That's because some college stores actually do add $10 to the price of a $20 book.

If you will accept my claim that uncontrolled prices are a form of unsuitability, then, I will have come to the end of my first major argument -- that the forces which I've called mentioning, dumbing down, homogenizing, and shilling are inherent pressures leading to the unsuitability of our basic texts.

Turn now to my second contention, that basic texts are not reflective of the new audiences we are expected to teach. I will admit that I am probably arguing here from a privileged position -- because I think I'm already having to teach these new audiences. My college was the first in the country explicitly designed to teach blacks and whites together, it was the second to treat males and females as equals in the classroom, and it is still, so far as I know, the only institution of higher learning exclusively devoted to the education of the poor. I can tell you right now that textbooks aren't aimed at this audience. Let me briefly mention just some of the communication channels left out of the textbooks but open to the messages of the minorities and the poor. These channels include but are not restricted to the extended (as opposed to the nuclear) family, minimum-wage workplaces like groceries and fast food restaurants, the ethnic or pentacostal church, labor unions, foreign language and alternative newsletters and newspapers, self-help associations, neighborhood taverns and dance halls, and amateur sporting teams. I would argue that our new students are apt to use these communication channels before those more commonly taught in the classrooms or cited in the texts. But the communication described in our instructional materials might as well have been primarily included for middle and upper class white guys who are preparing for politics, the law, and middle management. I remember my students reviewing an instructional videotape prepared by one of the textbook publishers. The tape showed a number of students giving speeches. What my students noticed when they watched the video was the suits. Everyone, even the women, had on these great suits. And the speeches were interchangable

-- black or white, male or female, everybody gave the same speech. It was like watching some movie where the marching robots took over the earth.

But crossapply everything I said about illustrations in the texts. If my students have spent their younger years in fundamentalist churches, and many of them have, then texts do them a disservice by denying this part of their communicative experience. If my students come from dysfunctional families, and many of them do, then the texts do not help them come to grips with their problems. If my students find racial or class barriers confronting them at every turn, or are having difficulty confronting their sexuality, or cannot see the relevance of so much college teaching because they are the first generation of their family to seek a higher education, then the usual homogenized pablum about relationships is a mockery of some of their deepest needs.

So then, and this is my third contention this afternoon, if there are inherent flaws to the texts aimed at the basic course, and if there are always students who will not find the materials particularly relevant, then how are we to provide them with appropriate materials? I will argue there are two sources of appropriate information: students themselves, and the expert practitioners in the field.

I shall maintain, first, that the best sources of materials directed toward an explanation of student's past experiences or present needs are the students themselves. Let me expand on this for a moment. There are a certain number of set pieces in the basic texts we use. How to define communication, for example, how to find materials, how to organize a speech. I would argue there are other setpieces which ought to be contained in the texts. We are told there are basic interpersonal needs, like the needs for affection, for inclusion, for control, that are part of everyone's communicative experience. I would suggest we need to listen to our students' past histories, to see how they have been shaped by the presence or absence of those basic requirements. We also need to know the situations they are dealing with now, the problems they expect to face in the future. How are they dealing with the losses they've had in coming to college, and what does this tell them about self-concept? How are they getting on with their roommates, and what does this have to do with their competence as communicators? How are they learning to deal with harassment of whatever kind? What skills do they expect to need as potential employees, or employers, or marriage partners? How are they learning to deal with conflict? How are they learning to manipulate the bureaucratic systems they have become a part of? How do they get themselves liked? How do they make themselves believed? What, if we were to send them to the library, would they find particularly helpful in answering these questions? What would they find if we sent them to other departments? What would they find if we only let them talk among themselves? Is there any really important concept in our basic texts that is so obscure that it wouldn't be found if we sent our students along one of these alternate routes? I would suggest, rather, that most of what we teach is self evident, and that if students could be taught to be introspective enough, then they would learn these ideas more effectively because they would have discovered them for themselves. Finally, they would own their own educations.

None of all this is new. Whether we call it participatory education, or collaborative education, or some other name, the point is that the students discover what they need to know for themselves. In our part of the mountains, we point with pride to Elliott Wigginton, who discovered that students would not learn when they were given a text prepared by "outsiders," but learned with enthusiasm when they cooperated in preparing the texts themselves. I commend to you Wigginton's book, *Sometimes a Shining Moment*, which describes the *Foxfire* movement in detail. But Rabun County, Georgia, is not the only school district doing this sort of thing. In elementary schools all over our country, pupils are learning to read by preparing their own primers, just as in the graduate schools of our nation, students are learning research by writing their own dissertations. Why cannot communication in the basic course be learned in the same way?

Second, I shall maintain that for what our students will need to know the the future, we ought to turn to people who are already making use of what they need to know. It can be argued of course that our students don't have the foggiest idea what communication skills they will need in the future and require, therefore, the expert guidance of the publishers. I have two responses to this: first, which of them knows what skills our students will need in the future? I prepared these remarks on my MacIntosh, an instrument which did not even exist ten years ago and

certainly wasn't anticipated by any of my composition texts. But second, why assume that a PhD gives textbook authors the necessary qualifications even if they did know the future? I have fantasized, occasionally, about having real experts write a communication text someday -- Peggy Noonan writing the chapter on verbal style, for example, or Jane Pauley the chapter on delivery. I would submit that advertising agency executives, lawyers, engineers, recruiters, housewives, clerics, insurance agents, department store clerks all develop hands-on expertise in communication. Why are we not making use of what they know by asking for their assistance in preparing materials for the basic course?

Put these two sources, students and practitioners, together, and our basic texts would look quite different than they do now. Indeed we might end up with a different text for every student, a text prepared with word processor and xerox machine, a self made text that had no connection to the commercial publishing business, a text that might never make it to hard copy because it was undergoing constant revision. I wonder how many of us are willing to take control from the publishers, empower our students, and allow something like this to happen.